

## Commentary: Views on Sport Development Feature

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Gill, D.L. (2011). Commentary: Views on sport development feature. *Journal of Sport, & Social Issues*, *xx*, 1-6. doi:10.1177/0193723511416983.

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### **Abstract:**

I appreciate the opportunity to review and offer commentary on the articles in this special edition on sport development. The discussion of sport development as a scholarly and programmatic movement is a new and welcome discovery for me. Thus, this commentary reflects the views of an outsider in that I am not an active contributor to sport development. However, many of the scholars contributing to this feature, and to the larger discussion of sport development, raise issues that resonate with my own scholarly work. In that sense, I am not a complete outsider and emphasize connections and opportunities with sport development in this commentary.

**Keywords:** Commentary | Sports Psychology | Sports Development | Research

### **Article:**

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### **General Impressions**

As outlined in Schinke and Cole's introductory piece, and as evident in the articles, sport development highlights the "social." As I have discussed elsewhere (Gill, 2009) that emphasis on social context, social relevance and social justice is critical but often missing in my disciplinary area of sport and exercise psychology. Indeed, that emphasis on social context and commitment to social justice seems a hallmark of sport development. Another related feature of sport development that resonates with this psychology of physical activity scholar is the focus on strengths, which reflects a positive psychology model that seems especially appropriate for those of us in kinesiology areas.

As the introductory article and invited papers suggest, sport development covers a lot. I am not clear on how to label it—multidiscipline/movement/program/trajectory—let alone define it. That

not only opens many possibilities but also presents challenges to those working in the area and to those who might connect with sport development. Drawing from Schinke and Cole's introduction, it seems that sport development refers to *sport contributing to human betterment*. They defined sport in encompassing terms as all forms of physical activity, although as reflected in the articles and current work, elite competitive sport seems to be hogging the spotlight.

Development is a broad term by any definition and seems particularly broad in sport development. Positive development in terms of developing strengths and resources is highlighted, but that still encompasses a lot. Moreover, the inclusion of individual, community, and social/global development levels seems so far-reaching that we cannot identify a unifying aim or purpose. Betterment, or positive development, seems to be quite different at the individual, community, and global level, and it may be counterproductive to try to bring all those under the same umbrella. As well as multiple levels, sport development is described as multidisciplinary, including subareas within kinesiology (e.g., psychology, sociology, motor development) as well as public health and education, and we could extend the list to include nearly every discipline and professional program area. Such diversity in perspectives, goals, and methods presents a big challenge and calls into question whether all can be encompassed by sport development. Schinke and Cole offered four trajectories as a starting point. I did not find that very helpful. Peace and reconciliation, social justice, and health and well-being all reflect "betterment," and, as the authors suggested, the articles and related programs overlap categories. I have no better suggestions and see the task as a "herding cats" challenge that might best be set aside at this point.

While a precise definition is elusive, several characteristics or themes of sport development come through clearly in these articles. The themes that came through in the introductory article, which then were realized and emphasized in the separate articles, seem to be social, context, engagement, and the long view. As noted earlier, social context and social relationships are highlighted and a commitment to social justice is evident in sport development. Context is critical in social development, and local context is the particularly relevant issue; all authors and programs highlighted the local context. Moreover, sport development programs are engaged in the community, moving beyond the one-way research-into-practice model to collaborative engagement. Related to engagement, as noted in Schinke and Cole's introduction, is the long-term commitment that ensures sustainability. Such long-term commitment is rare among researchers, and it is not clear that many sport development programs take the long view. Still, long-term commitment, along with engagement and contextual knowledge, seem to be benchmarks for true sport development.

### **Notes on Articles**

The articles in this feature not only reflect the general themes of sport development—social context, community engagement, and a positive strength-based approach to development but also present very different programs and perspectives, reflecting the wide scope of sport development. Following Schinke and Cole's introductory article, this feature includes two peace and reconciliation articles, and one each under social justice, health and well-being, and philanthropy. Given that only one area has two articles, which are quite different, and the overlap across areas, the classification scheme did not help me much in organizing my thoughts. Instead, I will add some notes on each article. My review of the articles was somewhat cursory, and my

understanding of the underlying scholarship and methodologies is even more limited. Thus, these notes are indeed, thoughts, and somewhat random ones at that. As a general commentary, every article was scholarly and thought-provoking. Each one led me to a greater appreciation for the author's work and made me think more broadly about my own work. At the same time, every article was different and sparked different thoughts and reflections.

The Lidor and Blumenstein article on sport psychology consulting with Jewish and Arab athletes seemed the most local and contextualized work, focusing on a very specific consulting experience with specific athletes. I very much appreciated that the authors set the context, including the larger social context as well as the specific sport consultation context, at the beginning of the article. Seldom do we see such clear description and recognition of the context in sport psychology literature. The power of context was clear throughout the article, and context clearly influenced the consulting intervention. The consultation was in many ways a typical (if there is a typical) teambuilding sport psychology consultation, but that consultation clearly took on different forms because of the context. I particularly liked the inclusion of parents as well as coaches, which yielded insights that would not otherwise have been uncovered. Issues of inequality and power relationships were apparent and might be explored further. The numbers of Arab and Jewish players were very unequal, perhaps reflecting the larger context and power relationships, or perhaps complicating those relationships. The authors provided lessons based on their experience and noted the limits of the program. Their observations, lessons, and limits raise issues and questions—much opportunity for sport psychology and continuing sport development.

The Blodgett et al. article on participatory action research with an aboriginal community and university researchers was a great model of engaged, contextualized action research. The long-term commitment and shift in focus for the university researchers is particularly notable; such sustained involvement and ceding of power, which is important for community development, is rare in the academic community. The shift toward empowerment over the longer term highlights the dynamic nature of development. This project highlights the local context and clearly reflects a move from the research-into practice model to engaged scholarship.

One specific point in the section on not oversimplifying information struck me as particularly important. As Blodgett et al. reported, the Aboriginal co-researchers warned that *researchers must take responsibility for the ways they convey information*. Here, they noted that academics must consider language and ensure that interpretations are accurate. That advice is important for all academics. Just as we are careful and attentive in preparing our work to put it out, we should be just as careful and pay attention to how that work is received. Seldom do academics even consider how it is received let alone take care to ensure that it is interpreted accurately by those who might use it.

Hartman and Kwauk's article on sport and development presents a broader critique of sport development. In describing development as a complicated and multivocal term that is used (and misused) in many ways, they highlight some of the challenges in sport development as a scholarly area. They identify two approaches to sport development—the dominant approach and the more radical approach. The dominant approach maintains the social structure—and thus is not in line with the empowering, social justice vision that is proposed by all the authors in this special feature. The radical, transforming approach seems to reflect the sport development

trajectory as described in these articles. However, as Hartmann and Kwauk suggest, changing a dominant model is a formidable task—to say the least. Whether sport development scholars and programs can take a more radical approach and move toward liberatory practice, as Hartmann and Kwauk advocate, seems a key question for sport development. Sport for development or betterment implies change. Putting that vision into action is a big challenge. Hartmann and Kwauk present the challenge well. Answers are not so clear. Who will meet the challenge, and where and how will sport change so that it is empowering and promotes social justice? That is the real question for sport development.

Coakley's piece on youth sports and positive development is my favorite. That is partly because youth sports is a prominent topic within the psychology area, and I am familiar with that literature. Mostly it is my favorite piece because Coakley brings a welcome critical analysis to that work. As usual, he makes the case in clear, understandable, and compelling terms. From the psychology view—few sociocultural scholars speak so well to us. As Coakley and several other authors in this feature note, sport is not automatically a positive force, and too often the sales pitch for the “global problems industry” is overreaching. As Coakley notes, the positive youth development perspective (and most psychology work) is linked to the U.S. educational system and heavily focused in individual development. Clearly youth development programs are missing that important connection to the community level and social change. I found it surprising that sociology scholars are not in the youth development literature. I hope more sociocultural scholars, as well as the sport development scholars represented in this feature, will take on that challenge and help move youth development from the individual focus and deficit-reduction model to a community-connected, strength-building model.

The final article on social responsibility and competitive bidding for major sporting events by Carey et al. is further from my own scholarly work and thus more challenging but no less thought-provoking. I find the category of philanthropy and corporate responsibility a stretch as sport development. Still, Carey et al.'s analysis and arguments make a convincing case for the role of major sports and particularly media representations in social/community development. Their analysis of the “packaging” of the bids for the Olympic Games by Rio de Janeiro and others highlight many issues that I cannot adequately interpret. Clearly it seems that the Rio bid was packaged to reflect “aid” to underdeveloped countries, as proposed in the Olympic Aid program. Based on my reading (which is not particularly informed), it seems that whether that packaging is accurate is questionable. For example, as the authors report, Chicago emphasized community development and addressed social inclusion and poverty alleviation in its bid, but that was not highlighted in the media reports. Moreover, it is not clear that the Olympic Games actually results in any real development for the host country. That seems the real connection to sport development—can major sporting events provide real social benefits, transform power relationships, or promote positive development in the community?

### **Directions/Closing Thoughts**

Given the scope and diversity of the articles, it is difficult to identify directions for sport development. I see several directions, and each article offers exciting possibilities. Still I find it difficult to see those directions as a *trajectory* for sport development. I do not have a clear picture of a common origin or a common destination for the multiple directions. Rather, they seem to be not only separate paths but also separate journeys. Perhaps that is not a problem. If

we do not assume that sport development is one area, with one scholarly base and purpose, then we do not need an organizational structure or one direction. We might consider that there are multiple “truths” in the destination of development as betterment; that is, the goal of positive development may be different in different contexts, communities, and times and from different perspectives. Similarly, there are multiple starting points and multiple paths to sport development. As Boyer (1990) argued, all four forms of scholarship—discovery, integration, application, and teaching—are important and inextricably connected, and all seem relevant for sport development. Elsewhere (Gill, 2007), I argued that integration is the essential, yet most neglected scholarship for kinesiology, and particularly for professional practice. Integration is similarly relevant for sport development. However, Boyer’s scholarship of application, which is now often termed *scholarship of engagement*, is even more important. Engaged scholarship goes beyond typical research and beyond the one-way research-into-practice application model. Rice (2005) noted that the scholarship of application conjures up images of a one-way relationship from expert to recipient and explicitly called for collaborative interaction in the scholarship of engagement. Rice described engagement as collaborative and multidirectional and necessarily local, rooted in a particular time and place—just as the authors here describe sport development.

The articles in this feature suggest many paths to sport development. All those paths reflect sport development as a truly collaborative and contextualized social process focused on human betterment. Sport development may not be moving on one trajectory, but sport development is on the move in positive directions.

#### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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